Eka Bilvam ShivaArpanam

(Glory – Significance - Merits of Bilva Tree)

Introduction…

There is nothing that one can ignore in this nature because it is all pervaded by the supreme God. Each element of nature whether it is men or animals or plants/trees, hills or rivers etc. depends on each other and one cannot survive without the

other. They complement each other for their survival and existence. So much so, plants and trees are an integral part of human or animal life and without plants/trees a man or an animal cannot survive.

Each part of the plant like roots, stems, bark, leaves and flowers are used in Hindu rituals. Apart from spiritual significance there is also an element of health consciousness and environmental protection involved in its usage. Even today these leaves/herbs are very much used in preparing Ayurvedic medicines used for curing several diseases. Apart from this they also act as a Divine way of controlling pollution, be it water or air.

In Hinduism, plants/trees are worshiped and are treated as embodiment of God since Vedic days. There is no worship or ritual in Hinduism without the usage of plants/trees in some form or the other. They are considered as divine personification and each Hindu God including the Navagrahas are represented by Plants/Trees. In Hindu religion, since Vedic days several plants and trees are associated with certain deities and their usage is mandatory in their worship, like for example, Thulasi with Lord Vishnu, Bilva with Lord Shiva, Durva (Garike) with Ganapathi, Arka plant (leaf) with Sun God, Amalaki with Lord Vishnu etc. The cult of tree/plant worship is as old as Hindu civilization.

Some of the great epic personalities and festivals are associated with trees. For example, Goddess Sita Devi with Ashoka Tree under whose shade she was resting during her sojourn in Lanka, Bhagawan Veda Vyasa (Badarayana) with Badari (Jujube). While performing sacred rituals Dharbha (Kusa grass) is invariably used. Sri Ganesha Chaturthi is associated with Pathra (leaf) pooja, and we use Shami leaves during Dussera festival, Amalaki during Dhaatri, Thulasi festival etc.

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In Bhagawadgita, Sri Krishna says that he is *Aśvatthaḥ sarva-vṛkṣāṇāṁ* the Aswattha Vruksha (Banyan Tree) among the Vrukshas (Trees). In Sri Vishnu Sahasranama Stothram we find reference to trees in sloka # 37, 88 where Lord Vishnu is described as Ashoka, Nyagrodho, Audumbara and Aswattha.

Stressing on the significance for sincerity, purity of mind and devotion in worship, Lord Sri Krishna says in Bhagawadgita (9th canto, sloka # 26)

पत्रं पुष्पं फलं तोयं यो मे भक्त्या प्रयच्छति ।
तदहं भक्त्युपहृतमश्नामि प्रयतात्मन: ॥ २६ ॥ (9.26)

patraṁ puṣpaṁ phalaṁ toyaṁ yo me bhaktyā prayacchati
tad ahaṁ bhakty-upahṛtam aśnāmi prayatātmanaḥ

That means whoever offers Me with devotion a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water, that I accept, offered with pure-mind and devotion. In these Houses-of-God, it is not the intricacies of their design, elaborateness of the ritual, nor the splendour of gold and wealth exhibited, nor even the number of devotees attending, that contribute to their essential success. Ultimately it is the sincerity and devotion (bhakti) that counts in divine worship. The very language and diction of the above stanza clearly sound the note that the material objects that one might offer are of no value to the Lord of the Universe, but it is the devotion and love that prompt the offerings that are accepted by the Deity. Be it "a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water" it is but an insignificant thing that you offer; be it a golden temple, or be it a dry leaf, "whosoever with devotion offers" whatever be the offering, Lord Sri Krishna assures "THAT I ACCEPT."

For, when lovingly given, it becomes "a devout gift" and when it is offered by a sincere "pure minded" devotee, the Lord has to accept it. Therefore, on the whole, it is clear that an offering can be efficient, only when it is accompanied by the two

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required conditions; (a) "offered with devotion" and (b) "by the pure-minded." To the extent these features are absent all offerings are mere economic waste and superstition breeding false-beliefs. If properly done, it can serve as a good vehicle to tread the spiritual path of self-development.

We find several pouranic references in this context like offering of Tandulam (beaten rice/avalakki) by Sudhama (Kuchela) etc.

When the Tulabara ceremony of Shri Krishna was performed, nothing could outweigh the Lord. However, when a single Tulasi leaf (Dala) was placed on the opposite scale, the balance tilted, and the Tulasi leaf outweighed the Lord. This demonstrates the power of devotion embodied by the Tulasi leaf, and, even more significantly, the immense love of the Lord for his devotees.

Significance of Bilva Pathra

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Bilva is closely associated with the worship of Lord Shiva one of Trinal Lords. It falls in the category of simplest forms of worship that of Lord Shiva who is symbolized in the most modest form. He gets pleased with a drop of water on his head (Shiva Linga) and worship with a leaf (Pathra) known as Bilva Pathra. It is considered highly sacred and celestial and is mandatory, without which the worship of Lord Shiva is incomplete. Bilva leaf is said to be the vegetal form of Lord Shiva which is said to be very dear to Him.

We find number of pouranic references to Bilva especially in Shiva Puranas. Bilva is considered as an embodiment of Lord Shiva himself and it is one of the sacred trees in Hinduism having spiritual powers.

Bilva tree is said to have manifested from Goddess Sri Maha Lakshmi and Sri Sooktham extols Goddess Lakshmi as…

आदित्यवर्णे तपसोऽधिजातो वनस्पतिस्तव वृक्षोऽथ बिल्वः ।

तस्य फलानि तपसानुदन्तु मायान्तरायाश्च बाह्या अलक्ष्मीः ॥

Aaditya-Varnne Tapaso[a-A]dhi-Jaato Vanaspatis-Tava Vrksso[ah-A]tha Bilvah |
Tasya Phalaani Tapasaa-Nudantu Maaya-Antaraayaashca Baahyaa Alakssmiih |

Oh' Lakshmi, your complexion is like that of a morning Sun, a vanaspathi (trees bearing fruits without blossoming) called by name Bilva was brought forth by your devout austerity. Through your favor may the fruits of the tree drive away my misfortunes and poverty both internal (ignorance) and external. It is believed and said that one who does penance/austerity/homa under the Bilva tree and meditate on Goddess Sri Maha Lakshmi will be bestowed with fulfillment of all desires (Bhadra-Lakshmistavam).

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In Sri Lakshmi Ashtothara Sathanama Stothram, we find Goddess Lakshmi described as Bilva Nilaya the one who lives under the Bilva Tree.

भास्करीं **बिल्वनिलयां** वरारोहां यशस्विनीम्।

वसुन्धरामुदाराङ्गां हरिणीं हेममालिनीम्॥

bhaskarim **bilvanilayam** vararoham yasasvinim ।

vasundhara mudarangam harinim hemamalinim |

In our Nitya Karma (Sandhyavandana) during Sandhyopasthana/Dikk Namaskaara we recite the following sloka...

क्षीरेणे स्नापिते देवि चन्दनेन विलेपिते ।

बिल्वपत्राऽर्चिते देवि दुर्गेऽहं शरणागताः ॥

Kṣīreṇe snāpite devi chandanena vilepite |
Bilvapatrā'rchite devi Durge'haṃ śaraṇāgatāḥ ||

I am surrendering to Goddess Durga (a form of Goddess Lakshmi) the one who is worshiped with Bilva Pathra. Goddess Lakshmi in the form of Durga is the one who is attainable by worshipping with Bilva leaves.

In Sri Venkateshwara Ashtottara Sathanaamaavali, we find Lord Venkateswara referred to as "Bilvapatrārcana priyāya namaḥ" At Tirumala temple there is a tradition to worship Lord Venkateswara with Bilva Pathra during Dhanurmasam.

Even in Garuda Purana also we find reference to Sriphala the fruit of Bilva tree which is considered as very auspicious.

Apart from Shiva Puranas, reference to Bilva is found in Sri Vaamana Purana, Garuda Purana, Sri Mahabharatha.

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Symbolism of Bilva Dala

Bilva Dala a confluence of three leaves trifoliate is a symbolic representation of Lord Shiva's weapon Trident (Thrishoola). It represents the Trinal Lords Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara.

It also represents the three qualities Sattva, Rajo and Tamo gunas and a symbolic representation of three syllables of Omkaara. Bilva dala also represents the three eyes of Lord Shiva who is known as Thrinethra.

Merits of Bilva tree

Bilva tree is known as the tree of prosperity and good fortune. That's why we find people keeping at home in their pooja room Sri Phala the fruit of Bilva Tree. It is believed that Bilva pathra can ward off the negative energy in a distressed person and reduce the effect of black energy. Merits of worshiping Lord Shiva with Bilva leaf and symbolism of Bilva leaves is better understood from an exclusive prayer known as Bilvaashtakam itself.

Lord Brahma resides at its bottom, Lord Vishnu lives in its middle and Lord Shiva lives in its tip. It is said that sacred Theerthas reside at the base of Bilva tree.

Worshipping Lord Shiva, performing abhishekam to Lord Shiva sitting under a Bilva tree and lighting of lamp in front of a Bilva tree is said to be highly meritorious and sacred. There is an interesting anecdote of a hunter getting salvation by unknowingly worshiping Lord Shiva with Bilva leaves on a Shivarathri day. Such is the glory and merits of Bilva tree in the worship of Lord Shiva.

Additional Notes…

It is described in Bhavishyottara Purana that Shree Vruksha (Bilva tree) should be worshipped on Bhadrapada Shukla Navami. That day is revered as SriVruksha Navami

The Bilva vriksha is associated with goddess SriDevi (Lakshmi). Bilva is the tree of Lakshmi. Lakshmi Tantra regards Bilva vriksha as the form of Lakshmi (Lakshmi swarupa); and, its

fruit as Sreephala, the fruit of Sree. It is said that this fruit was originated from the right hand of Mahalakshmi in some Scriptures whereas some others (Brihaddharma Purana) hold that it is originated from her breast.

According to a Pouranic narration, SriDevi performed penance amidst the Bilva trees; and, because of her grace the Bilva fruits acquired unique medicinal properties. There is faith that Lakshmi Devi resides in Bilva tree and offering Bilva-leaves during puja is dearer to her, and hence to Vishnu. The Laksmi Tantra (Pancharatra Agama) mentions that Vishnu temple should preferably be surrounded by Bilva grove.

Skanda Purana narrates that the Bilva tree originated from the sweat of Goddess Parvati. According to the legend mentioned in the text:

- Goddess Parvati was once tired from her divine sports or intense austerities (*tapas*).
- Drops of sweat fell from her forehead onto the Mandrachal mountain (or Mount Mandara).
- A magnificent tree grew from those sweat droplets, which the Goddess named the Bilva tree.

Because the tree originated directly from her body, it is believed that Goddess Parvati resides within every part of the Bilva tree in her various forms:

- Girija in the roots
- Maheshwari in the trunk
- Dakshayani in the branches
- Parvati in the leaves
- Katyayani in the fruit
- Gauri in the flowers

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This divine origin is why the Bilva leaf is considered so sacred and is the most favored offering for Lord Shiva.

Botanical significance

Botanically Bilva tree is known as Aegle Marmeolus, family of Rutaceae. It is a scraggy tree with a crust of thick thorns. Tall and austere with a stern aspect gnarled trunk, Bilva tree grows in almost all parts of India irrespective of the nature of soil.

Apart from India, it grows in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan and South East Asia. Generally, we find Bilva trees in Lord Shiva temples. Its leaves are alternate, ovate, trifoliate and aromatic. Bilva fruits are woody in nature, oval shaped with yellow pulp. In Sanskrit it is known as Bilva and its fruit as Sriphala, as Stone apple in English, as Maaredu in Telugu, as Bel in Hindi, as Bilva Pathra in Kannada and as Vilvam in Tamil.

Medicinal properties of Bilva Tree

Bilva tree is highly medicinal and all its parts including its roots, stems, bark, leaves, flowers and fruits are used in the preparation of Ayurvedic medicines and in curing of various diseases. Traditionally the science of Ayurveda gives lot of significance for its usage and is known as a healing tree which cures diseases especially caused by Vaata (windy) dosha. Bilva fruit is highly beneficial in chronic dysentery or diarrhea. It is specifically used in correcting the irregularity of bowel movement. It acts as a laxative when there is constipation. Unripe fruit is used in curing excess of Vaata and Kapha doshas, stomach ache and dyspepsia and other intestinal disorders. Fruit pulp mixed with honey is used in controlling vomiting. Its fruit juice acts as a blood purifier. Bilva leaves are used in Diabetes mellitus. Leaves are also used in controlling fever, flue and fatigue. Oil extracted from the root of Bilva tree is used in the diseases relating to Ear especially in relieving problems relating to ear ache, inflammation,

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discharge with foul odour, humming sound in the ear etc. Apart from medicinal uses, Bilva leaves are also used in purifying water. While usage of Bilva tree and its parts have proven medicinal value, it is suggested to use them only under medical advice.

naham karta harih karta

Hari Sarvottama – Vaayu Jeevottama

Hara Vaishnavottama

Sri GuruRaajo Vijayate

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